

# Conclusion: What is South Carolina?

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We began this book by asking two questions. What does Africa mean to you and what does Africa mean to South Carolina? If you have read this book carefully, you know the answer to these questions is in the title of this final chapter. What is South Carolina? Whether your ancestors are European, African, Asian, Native American, South or Central American, or some mixture of all of these does not matter. In one sense, the answer is the same. If you are a South Carolinian, regardless of your personal ethnic background, Africa is part of you. It is part of South Carolina. Africa is in our history, politics, art, music, food, methods of growing food, buildings, religion, our manners, and even our very speech. Some scholars even claim that we can see as much African culture in white Southerners as in black Southerners. It is time we all understand, acknowledge, and appreciate this fact. South Carolina is many things, but a very important part of it is Africa.

We have spoken about many contributions made by generations of people. Africans who were brought to South Carolina and their African-American children contributed much of the skill and labor that made the state relatively wealthy in colonial times. They created the rice culture. This includes not just rice, but the way of life that surrounded what was grown. The crafts and skills they brought and learned changed not only South Carolina, but the nation. They brought important practices in cattle herding that helped create the American cowboy. Even though enslaved, they never lost their thirst for freedom. They took their own religious heritage and combined it with Christian religious beliefs to express that thirst for freedom in rich and emotional ways. This changed forever the practice of religion in America. Many of their hopes

had to remain hidden. They taught us that religious expressions have different levels of meaning. Generations of African-Americans endured hardships that we can only try to imagine. That endurance is another kind of contribution. Their endurance inspires us to know that we can endure what we think of as hardships today. That endurance lasted through failed revolts, a Civil War, the short-lived hopes of Reconstruction, and nearly 100 years of second-class citizenship. During the Reconstruction years, African-Americans made great political contributions. A bill of rights, a public school system, and a state government that begins to see that it should help build prosperity are no small things. Through all these years African-Americans worked and built. They ran farms, started family businesses, and helped each other whenever possible. Surely, they must have felt discouraged at times.

Progress came ever so slowly. Finally, when the time was right for a "second reconstruction," as the civil rights movement is sometimes called, they were ready. They contributed to a national movement that has given all of us better chances in life. Those who led that movement in South Carolina showed great patience. They acted with moderation. They suffered perhaps a little longer than they might have. That enabled the civil rights movement in the state to take place with relatively little violence.

Along this journey African-Americans contributed in other ways. Some of these ways are just now being recognized. African-American scholars, scientists, artists, and performers have all contributed to our knowledge, wealth, and culture. Even though they were never fully free in what was supposed to be the land of the free, generations of African-American sol-

diers gave their lives to defend the nation. They are among the heroes of battles from even before the American Revolution through today's modern high tech wars.

Today African-Americans are contributing to all aspects of life in South Carolina. Among them may be teachers in your school, local officials, civic leaders in your community, businesspersons helping your community to grow, and those who write and report your local news. We could only talk about a very few of these important people. Thousands had to be left out.

We are moving to a multicultural society. We are moving to a society where we are learning to share a common culture that was created by us all. At the same time, we are moving toward the time when we are brave enough and secure enough to learn about and respect all of the cultures that we bring to South Carolina. We are moving to a day when English, Irish, Germans, Jews, Native Americans, all of us will feel comfortable in celebrating and learning about African heritage. We are moving to a day when we can study the past, but not to make someone feel guilty or inferior. Rather, we will be able to admit mistakes and learn to do better.

While we may be moving in this direction, the journey is not over. We still have a way to go. The fact that this book had to be written as a supplement shows that we have not yet arrived. African contributions need to be better integrated into a common text. The same can be said of cultural contributions of Native Americans and others.

The journey will not be entirely easy. However, it will be no harder than the long way we have already come. Some fear this. They fear that their own backgrounds will be lost. Those fears are misplaced. We cannot expect respect for our own backgrounds unless we afford the same respect for the backgrounds of others. Tolerance and mutual respect are among the most basic values of a democracy.

All groups have their own challenges to face. The African-American community is facing their own special challenges as well. We can see this in the statements and actions of community groups today in the state. The first step is admitting that problems exist. That is being done. You will find that almost any panel

of African-American community leaders today will talk about a number of critical problems. An African-American health expert at the Black Family Summit at USC advised African-Americans to "think smarter, eat smarter, and do smarter." Part of that comes from building self-confidence. Gwen Owens, mother of the 1993 "Black Family of the Year," spoke of the special responsibility of African-American parents. She said that parents have to spend time with children and build their confidence. This requires more effort when children belong to a minority group. Adults must provide the kind of positive role models that make young people want to achieve. Thomas Martin, uncle of astronaut Charles Bolden and a teacher for thirty years, urged parents to be more involved providing leadership and to spend more time in the schools.

Representative Jim Clyburn often speaks to groups about giving African-Americans a sense of power over their lives. This can overcome peer pressure which sometimes tells African-American school children that getting good grades is "acting white."

After reading this book, you should clearly understand from all the people you have met that success comes in all colors. Generations of African-Americans have found success in all fields. We just have not given them the recognition they deserve. That is beginning to change. Ollie Hough and her company, Q. H. Productions, sponsored the first "South Carolina Black Male Showcase" in Columbia in 1992. The event recognized twenty-two average yet extraordinary African-Americans who are family-oriented, successful, and active in their communities.

What can you do? Reading this book is a small start. Talking to each other is the next step. Students at Marion High School, led by its new African-American principal, are taking that next step. Their motto is "Harmony with Diversity." They are sharing ethnic foods, dances, and having trivia contests about all the various cultures that make up the state. They are integrating different cultures into all the parts of their classes.

The different ethnic cultures that make up this state have lived together for a long time. We have not always gotten along very well. We have wasted talents and driven good people away. As a result, we



*Schofield Middle School students link their arms in solidarity in front of the old bell tower that marks the original Schofield School, built to educate African-Americans after the Civil War. Just like you, these students are the link between the past and the future of South Carolina. Photo by Aimee Smith.*

are a much poorer state than we otherwise might have been. The future of the state is in your hands. We can learn about each other and respect each other. We can build on the contributions made by all the people who have come before us. Or we can ignore, disrespect, forget, and fail to learn from our past. The choice belongs to you.

What does Africa mean to you? What is South Carolina to you? It is part of your past. That is true. It is also part of your future. What South Carolina will be to you and your children depends on how you view the past. We have looked back at ancestors who made many contributions. Soon it will be your turn.

